In recent years, the Ohio General Assembly has enacted pro-immunization legislation that restored the immunization entry requirement for state licensed childcare centers, expanded the pool of providers who can immunize children, and added meningitis to the required list of immunizations for school entry. As a result, we have seen our immunization rates increase for certain age groups.

Immunizations are safe, effective, and supported by the vast majority of parents and voters. As the leading voice for children’s health in Ohio, we believe that more work is needed to improve Ohio’s immunization rates. Immunizations are one of most significant healthcare achievements in history. We are asking our legislative leaders to take one more vital step to promote immunizations and protect children.

The Challenge: Philosophical exemptions are putting children at risk
Since the addition of a philosophical exemption in 2005, Ohio’s immunization rates have declined sharply. Prior to that, when Ohio only allowed exemptions for medical and religious rationale, the Buckeye State had some of the highest immunization rates in the nation. The challenges that Ohio faces in terms of achieving adequate immunization rates and preventing outbreaks of immunization-preventable diseases has received significant media coverage in recent years:

“Health officials say when large numbers of people start foregoing vaccines, it puts an entire community at risk because some individuals can’t get vaccinated. Very young children and people with immune disorders rely on an immunized public to create a buffer between them and sick people, which doctors call ‘herd immunity.’”
- Ohio elementary schools struggle to get students vaccinated, Associated Press, April 16, 2017

“Three out of four elementary schools in Ohio failed to have every incoming kindergartner documented as either vaccinated or exempt from vaccination by the state deadline this school year. It’s part of an ongoing struggle in the state to get vaccination rates up to recommended standards that health officials say could lead to more outbreaks of whooping cough, mumps and measles — all of which Ohio schools have encountered in recent years.”
- Ohio struggling to get students vaccinated, Dayton Daily News, April 11, 2017

“Health officials say students who don’t receive shots put people who cannot be vaccinated in jeopardy. Officials say babies and children with compromised immune systems are among the vulnerable population.”
- Low vaccination rates in schools concern health officials, Dayton Daily News, August 10, 2016

Further, we have seen outbreaks of immunization-preventable diseases including measles, mumps, and pertussis in recent years due to an increase in the number of immunization opt-outs. A number of studies have been published over the past few years to show the connection between immunization opt-outs and outbreaks of preventable diseases among children—

“In recent years, vaccine refusal and associated declines in herd immunity have contributed to numerous outbreaks of infectious diseases, consumed public health resources, and provoked increasingly polarized debates between supporters and opponents of vaccines.”
- Vaccine Refusal Revisited — The Limits of Public Health Persuasion and Coercion, New England Journal of Medicine, October 6, 2016

“Legislation requiring immunization before school entry increases immunization rates and dramatically decreases the incidence of vaccine preventable diseases. Examples of these include immunization against measles and chickenpox. Likewise, higher rates of immunization exemptions in communities correlate with higher rates of vaccine preventable illnesses and disease outbreaks, such as pertussis and measles.”
The challenge we face as a state is very real—the adoption of a philosophical exemption to Ohio’s school immunization requirements has directly contributed to a decline in our immunization rates and outbreaks of vaccine-preventable diseases in many Ohio communities. The majority of states only allow opt-outs for medical and religious reasons and a handful of states that grant philosophical exemptions have repealed those statutes in recent years.

The Opportunity: Strengthening Ohio’s immunization laws will protect children, save lives

The Ohio Chapter of the American Academy of Pediatrics, in collaboration has prepared a legislative change to Ohio’s immunization laws that will strike a better balance between parental rights and the overall health and wellbeing of our children. In summary, our proposal would do all of the following—

- **Standardize Opt-Out Processing:** Currently, immunization exemptions are treated differently across the state. Schools use different forms and there is no requirement that parents meet with a healthcare provider to discuss immunization and to have the form filled out. We feel that conversations with a healthcare provider are essential to ensure that parents have all the appropriate medical and scientific information prior to making a decision about immunizing their child. This provision would establish a standard form for all school districts to use and would require that a physician or other licensed healthcare provider sign the form. This is identical to how immunization entry forms are handled for state licensed childcare centers. States that have gone this direction have seen a 35% decrease in opt out of vaccines in just one year.

- **Strengthen Reporting of Immunization Opt-Outs:** As noted in a number of recent media reports, Ohio does not have reliable data regarding the number of children who have been exempted from immunization requirements at the school district and school building level. As a result, we are always not able to effectively respond to a disease outbreak. Much of this breakdown is due to inconsistent handling of immunization forms and the transfer of information between school districts, local health departments, and the state. Our proposal would streamline how this data is handled and reported so public health officials, parents of immunocomprised children, and other stakeholders will know the opt-out rate at each school building.

**Long Term Opportunity for Greatest Impact**

- **Eliminate the Philosophical Exemption:** Ohio remains in a small minority of states that still allow opt-outs for philosophical reasons. In recent years, many states have eliminated their philosophical exemptions and seen dramatic increases in their immunization rates. Prior to 2005, Ohio only allowed exemptions for medical reasons and religious beliefs. We feel this is an adequate standard that puts Ohio in line with the majority of other states. This will protect the small number of children who cannot receive an immunization for a medical reason and also provide anti-vaccine parents with a pathway to opt-out of an immunization requirement should they choose to do so. States that have gone this direction have seen a 61% decrease in opt out of vaccines in just one year.

Public opinion polling consistently shows that more than 87% of parents support immunization requirements and believe immunizations are safe and effective. We believe now is the time to enact these vital changes, which we know will boost Ohio’s immunization rates and keep our children safe and healthy.